

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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MORTON URGES CONGRESSIONAL ACTION ON WILDERNESS PROPOSALS

Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton, discussing new proposals by President Nixon to add more than a million additional acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System, today urged Congress to take action on a backlog of wilderness proposals made by the Administration in recent years.

Of almost 6 million acres previously recommended for wilderness designation on lands managed by the Department of the Interior, Morton noted, Congress has acted affirmatively on only 300,000 acres, about one-twentieth.

"We are encouraged, however, by the substantial number of hearings on wilderness proposals conducted by Congressional committees, and we hope they will result in action within a short time," the Secretary said.

The new areas proposed by the President today are in twelve units of the National Park System and National Wildlife Refuge System. Largest acreages are in the desert Southwest, notably in Big Bend and Mesa Verde National Parks and in Joshua Tree, Bandelier and Saguaro National Monuments.

The National Wilderness Preservation System was established in 1964 when Congress declared its intent to secure for future generations of Americans "an enduring resource of wilderness," defined as an area "untrammeled by man...retaining its primeval character...with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable" and having "outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation."

In enacting the law, Congress placed 54 National Forest areas containing 9.1 million acres immediately into the wilderness system, and directed the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to review other areas under their jurisdiction and make recommendations to the President as to their suitability for inclusion. The President reviews these recommendations and forwards them to Congress, which alone has the authority to designate areas as wilderness under the Act.

As a result of this review the Department of the Interior has recommended in prior years, and the President has forwarded to Congress, proposals to designate 29 separate areas managed by the National Park Service and 49 areas managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. These areas total nearly 6 million acres, an area about the size of Vermont, but Congress has acted on only 300,000 acres.

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The Agriculture Department's proposals have fared somewhat better but not well enough, Secretary Morton declared. From 1964 through 1972 that Department, through the President, proposed 26 National Forest areas for wilderness designation totaling more than 3.4 million acres, but Congress thus far has designated only 14 of those areas totaling 1.7 million acres as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Morton noted also that Congress has not yet acted upon a significant amendment to the Wilderness Act proposed by the Administration this year, which would add 16 Eastern areas to the wilderness system and designate 37 more for study. All are in National Forests. Virtually all the officially designated wilderness areas are now in the West.

Today's proposals forwarded to Congress by the President all involve Interior Department lands. In Morton's words, they "represent a variety of environments where nature still predominates and where man can experience the solitude and splendor of wilderness." He cited miles of unspoiled beach and rocky shoreline in Point Reyes National Seashore, California, and thousands of acres of "splendid desert in California, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico, habitat to waterfowl, deer, bear, mountain lion and many other species including some that are endangered." Included as well, he noted, are hardwood forests in Arkansas, offshore islands in Oregon, and pristine sandhill habitat in Nebraska.

SUMMARY OF TODAY'S NEW WILDERNESS PROPOSALS

Bandelier National Monument	21,110
Big Bend National Park	533,900
Joshua Tree National Monument	372,700
Mesa Verde National Park	8,100
Point Reyes National Seashore	10,600
Saguaro National Monument	42,400
Valentine National Wildlife Refuge	16,317
Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge	24,502
White River National Wildlife Refuge	975
Mingo National Wildlife Refuge	1,700
Oregon Islands National Wildlife Refuge	346
Imperial National Wildlife Refuge	14,470
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